

First record of an Australian Sea Lion on the eastern Australian coast

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The Australian Sea Lion

The Australian Sea Lion (*Neophoca cinerea*) is one of the world's rarest sea lions, with a population estimated at 3,000 to 5,000 (King 1983).

Neophoca cinerea is presently found only in Australian waters, from Houtman Abrolhos in Western Australia to Robe in the south east of South Australia, as shown in Fig. 1 (Walker and Ling 1981; Ling, personal communication 1990). Additionally, it should be noted, there are reports of old males being seen as far east as Portland in Victoria. The species breeds on offshore islands, in a slightly more restricted range. A skull was collected from Cape Barren Island in the Furneaux Group in Bass Strait in 1973, however it was quite old and may have lain on the beach for many years. In 1798 Matthew Flinders noted sea lions on several small islands of this group (Marlow and King 1974).

Birdie Beach Sighting

At about 10 a.m. on 22nd December, 1989 a seal, 2.24m in length, hauled out on the northern end of Birdie Beach (33°13'S, 151°35'E) in the Munmorah State Recreation Area, between Sydney and Newcastle, New South Wales. It was later identified from photographs as a male *Neophoca cinerea*.

Subsequent enquiries to a number of museums, and to the National Parks and Wildlife Service and other recognised authorities, reveal no known prior sighting of *N. cinerea* on the eastern coast of Australia.

The National Parks and Wildlife Service, with the assistance of volunteers from ORRCA (Organisation for the Rescue and

Research of Cetaceans in Australia), cordoned off the area to minimise disturbance to the animal.

The seal had three fresh-looking (but somewhat infected) oval-shaped wounds on its left ventral surface, consistent with bites inflicted by the Cookie-cutter Shark (*Isistius brasiliensis*), and gave every appearance of exhaustion. For several days its only movements were progressively up the beach to avoid being lapped by waves, and down again with the tide to cooler sand. There was little reaction when we approached, or even when we once touched its tail.

The teeth were yellowed, chipped and worn, suggestive of an old animal. Notwithstanding its exhausted state, the seal appeared to have excellent condition, as can be seen from the photograph (Fig. 2).

We sprayed its wounds several times a day with an aerosol of Chloromide antiseptic, and observed an apparent lessening in the infection. Apart from that, we disturbed it as little as possible.



Fig. 1. Present-day range of *Neophoca cinerea* (after Walker and Ling 1981).

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Contributions



Fig. 2. The Australian Sea Lion at Birdie Beach.

On Christmas Day we saw some signs of improvement. The seal wriggled on its back and then moved towards the sea, entering the water momentarily to let a wave wash over it. That evening at 9.30 p.m. it left the beach.

As locals had reported the animal was heading north before it came ashore, we searched to the north the next day, and found it in a sheltered cove with a pebble beach, about 1 km away. It was resting on the beach, swimming, and diving in turn, giving every appearance of recovery. Two days later, an unconfirmed report had it another 5 km north, at Catherine Hill Bay, and we have not heard of it since.

The animal was not tagged or marked. It may be an aid to subsequent identification that the fifth digit of the left hind-flipper is truncated, flush with the webbing.

On 11th March, 1990 a second, and different, male *Neophoca cinerea*, 2.30m in length, was photographed by the author

while hauled out for three days on a jetty in Wollongong Harbour, just south of Sydney, following heavy seas. Fishermen reported having seen two seals in the harbour just previously.

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References

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